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ABSTRACT

Results are presented of a 10-year longitudinal study of students who completed the Inquiry Program (IP) at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, which provides an alternative approach for meeting most general education requirements. Standard performance measures and questionnaires completed by program graduates were examined. Compared to other students in the entering class, IP students scored about average on the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Based on their high school grades and class rank, IP students were expected to complete a degree program but not to distinguish themselves. It was found that 50 percent of university students graduated with their entering class, compared to 76 percent of IP students. In addition, 65 percent of IP students completing their program received honors degrees, and 50 percent entered graduate school. Six components of the program are discussed: advising; a learning contract between student and a tutor; regular evaluations; emphasis on learning how to learn, basic skills, and understanding of scholarship and research; a learning portfolio; and bringing formal closure to the student's lower division general education. In addition to a discussion of the affective learning aspects of the program, attention is directed to the way that ritual can promote student growth. (SW)

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Improving Retention and Performance:

A Case of Useable Attention

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Paper Prepared for Presentation at the 1985 Meetings of the Association For the Study of Higher Education, Chicago, March 15-17, 1985.

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This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago, Illinois, March 15-17, 1985. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

I. The Program: Structures and Processes

At the University of Massachusetts-Amherst entering students encounter an urban campus environment in a rural landscape. Architecturally the campus lacks both a visual focus and a coherent style. Student housing accommodates less than half of the 24,000 students. Freshmen are required to live on campus, and the majority of the 4,000 entering students live in a concrete dormitory complex that is the fifth most densely populated 1/4 square mile in the world.

The University's general education requirements contribute to the milieu of a haphazardly developed urban culture. All undergraduates are required to take two semesters of writing and three courses in each of the major categories of knowledge: Natural Sciences and Math, Social and Behavioral Sciences, and the Humanities and Arts. The College of Arts and Sciences adds a fourth course in each of the three categories and a two year foreign language requirement. Students select courses, with virtually no formal advising, from a catalogue of no less than 1200 courses. Without exception these general education courses are little more than the lower division prerequisites for majors in the respective departments.

In this setting the Inquiry Program appears as a safe and comfortable neighborhood of one hundred students and 2.8 full time faculty who share a commitment to general education, a pedagogy, and a philosophy. Operating under a mandate from the Faculty Senate, the Inquiry Program provides an alternative means of satisfying both the University and the College of Arts and Sciences general education requirements- except for the foreign languages.

The purposes of this paper are (1) to present the results of a ten year longitudinal study of the students who have completed the Inquiry Program and graduated from the University, and (2) to offer an analysis of these results. The data base is a combination of the standard measures of student performance and a five page questionnaire completed by every program graduate. The analysis draws upon interpretive anthropology as pioneered by Clifford Geertz.

Retention at UMass (defined as graduating with the entering class) is 50%. 76% of the students who go through IP graduate with their class; 12% (one half of those who do not complete the program) do graduate from the schools to which they transfer. Retention, however, is only part of the story, the plot of a sequence of actions without characters or substance.

The students are also successful by the standard measures. Students are recruited from the entering class during freshman orientation. IP students at the time of admission are statistically near the center of their entering class:

SAT Scores

	Verbal	Math
IP	550	560
UM	536	575

According to the standard predictors of high school grades and class rank, IP students should not be expected to distinguish themselves, although they should be expected to take a degree. The longitudinal study of the Program's first ten years confirms our impressions of a very different

outcome. As a group IP students receive high grades:

	end of sophomore year	university graduation
IP students	3.42	3.5
UM cohort	2.8	2.9

65% of those who completed the program received Honors degrees. and 50% of its graduates have entered graduate school.

It is tempting to read this study as confirmation of one or more developmental theories and/or hypotheses about the impact of college on freshmen and sophomores. For years the Program was known as "experimental" and the work of Maslow and Piaget was known to the faculty. But there was no carefully controlled experiment, and the developmental literature was invoked on a case-by-case basis rather than systematically applied.

A more accurate depiction of the history imbedded in the statistics of the longitudinal study is the idea that the Program is a stage on which a seemingly diverse group of players can enact their ideals of a general education. The first step in understanding the results, then, is to identify the actors.

The faculty come from a variety of traditional disciplines, ranging from Anthropology through Literature, Nuclear Chemistry, Political Theory to Theater. Graduate teaching assistants represent a similar diversity which ranges from Creative Writing and Linguistics to Higher Education and Political Science. The differences in training and scholarly interests are melded into a cohesive whole by a set of shared commitments. First among them is a passion for teaching people as well as a subject-based

discipline. Second is a philosophy which gives credence to the rhetoric that higher education is predicated upon a solid general education. Finally, there is a pedagogy which seeks to integrate the classroom with advising and a curriculum that demands both hard work and an active involvement from the students.

From the beginning the demographic profile of the students has been remarkably consistent. Starting in 1972, of the one hundred students matriculated in any given semester, 2/3 are women, 2% are minorities, and 20% are from out of state. (UMass has a strict 15% out of state quota.)

Admission to the Program is based upon interviews with student and instructional staff, and an essay application which asks students why education is important to them at this time in their lives and how they plan to make use of a program that allows a great deal of flexibility within the control of an intensive advising process. The staff treats this first contact with the program as the initial advising session. Students experience these often extensive meetings as a process of self-selection.

Our students' testimony, and a number of studies, prove that high school seniors select colleges on the most dubious of criteria. Except for the out of state students, for whom admission to this University is extremely competitive, the University is a school of resort rather than choice. A survey of all Program graduates reveals a high level of satisfaction with the results of the advising process:

42% say they would have left UMass had they not been in IP;
94% say they have a better sense of what education is than their cohort;
85% say that the Program contributed to their sense of self-worth;
83% say that the Program contributed to their sense of direction.

The effect seems to be that the Program provides a means of helping students to make the crucial choices for academic success after they have made the initial decision to enroll at this particular university. Put another way, under the guidance of both student and instructional staff, the applicants make an active decision to engage in a process which will lead to a conscious and informed selection of courses, activities, and major.

There are six basic components in this process.

The centerpiece is an advising system which we call tutoring. Every student is assigned a tutor and each semester the tutor and student negotiate the terms of how they will work together. The discussions may be limited to formal educational concerns or be wide-ranging and include affective factors such as relationships with roommates and parents. Although there is neither a proscribed format nor a requirement about how often student and tutor should meet, a definite pattern emerged early in the Program's history. During the first semester the meetings are frequent (weekly or bi-weekly). The second and third semesters usually have only three or four meetings. Students remain in the Program an average of 4.9 semesters and usually meet bi-weekly with their tutors during their last semester.

Advising styles vary according to both faculty abilities and student needs, but there are three essential goals which all share:

1. to help students to discover and develop their interests and abilities;

2. to construct a general education course of study that respects the integrity of the University's mission and furthers the student's educational goals; and
3. to provide consistent, reliable, and supportive attention.

The second component is the learning contract. Each semester tutor and student negotiate a contract which details the educational objectives for the semester, the means that will lead to their completion, and the types of evaluations to be used at the end of the semester.

In the first semester students are encouraged to unpack simplistic goals such as earning good grades. We ask them to investigate why they are in college; how she or he works best; and to begin to assess strengths and weaknesses. Formal courses of study are built upon expressed interests and easily discerned needs and strengths. Subsequent semesters see goals which expand the breadth of study in ways that are supportive of developing and choosing a major. Goals at this time often include formal and informal explorations of life styles and values.

The tutor's task is to help students learn to develop realistic goals. Realism in this instance means manageable in scope and consistent with abilities and values. Acting as advisor, counselor, guide, and mentor, the tutor is usually a mediator between the principles, values, and standards of general education, and a rapidly maturing young adult with distinctive needs and abilities. In the final analysis, the contract is actually a covenant between the student as intellectual worker and responsible young adult.

The third component is a set of regular evaluations. Just as skepticism is a sine qua non of science, criticism and self-criticism are essential to the process and success of the Program. Students are encouraged to get written evaluations from all their instructors. The Program requires both a mid-semester and an end of semester written self-evaluation, and the tutors provide evaluations at both points. The core faculty and staff review the entire student population at least once a semester. The agenda of the weekly staff meeting has room for instructors and tutors to alert their colleagues to problems individual students are encountering and to seek guidance. We make a point to include the professional staff in all of these reviews because they are often privy to information students are shy about giving to faculty.

As one colleague noted, Inquiry Program students receive a quantity and quality of attention that most graduate students never enjoy.

The effects can be dramatic. Until 1980, students in the Program were exempted from the foreign language requirement, but 85% met or exceeded the College of Arts and Sciences requirements because their goals called for a basic facility with at least a second language. One student, who resisted what he called the "stupidity" of learning a second language, surprised himself by spending his junior year in France, minoring in French, and is now planning to do post-doctoral work in France.

Both the contract and the evaluation process are synchronized with a formal curriculum and a classroom pedagogy which are the fourth major component of the Inquiry Program. There are five general aims here:

1. to help students learn how to learn;
2. to develop basic skills common to all intellectual work;
3. to instill an appreciation of the possibilities and liabilities of scholarship and research;
4. to develop an understanding that categories of knowledge are socially determined constructs with a history--not immutable imperatives; and
5. to provide a basis upon which to assess the aims and methods of other courses in the University.

The heart of the curriculum is a series of three Modes of Inquiry seminars, one each in the Natural Sciences and Math, the Social and Behavioral Sciences, and the Humanities and Arts. Enrollment is restricted to twenty and the classes are conducted as seminars. The content ranges from the classics, such as Hobbes, Lock, Hegel and Marx in the Social Sciences and Sophocles and Shakespeare in the Humanities and Arts, to very contemporary works. The content is a means to the above goals rather than an end in itself, as it is in traditional survey courses.

The styles of the individual instructors vary, but the shared pedagogy is easy to discern. It is dialogic. It is self-reflective. It embraces social-cultural-individual diversity but it demands discipline and critical thought. We often describe it as creative or constructive confusion; students often experience it as simple confusion.

In response to student evaluations we have added a pro-seminar, "Inquiry into Education," and an Integrative Seminar. The pro-seminar introduces the three modes of inquiry and the philosophy of the curriculum

in two contexts: the University general education requirements and the historical development of the present categories of knowledge. The purpose is to provide both an overview and a rationale which the students can use as coordinates while they navigate through the next two years. The Integrative Seminar adds nothing new per se. It aims to assist the students in reweaving the threads into a whole and useable fabric. It is during this final semester that most students experience a dramatic "A-Ha" insight. In most cases this climactic moment is the result of a series of insights and discoveries which had passed unnoticed at the time.

The regular evaluations help to produce "A-Ha" insights, but the most important means of discovery is the fifth component, the learning portfolio.

At first the portfolio is only a repository for basic documents: the application, contracts, papers from classes, and evaluations. Very quickly the portfolio can become an invaluable voice in the dialogue that is central to the development of direction, purpose, and sense of worth which students say they get from the Program. We encourage students to include everything conceivable at first. Some examples are programs from performances and concerts, journal entries about and evaluations from part-time jobs, anything that might possibly bear upon their growth and education.

Editing the portfolio during the Integrative Seminar is an important, penultimate step. Students--and often their tutors--discover patterns, interests, and concerns that may have eluded detection earlier or which were perceived only as vague impressions. The portfolios are kept in the

Program library and provide invaluable "texts" to subsequent generations of students.

The portfolios are also essential to the last component of the Program, the Celebration-Evaluation. We take both terms equally seriously. The C-E, as we call it, is a rite de passage at the mid-point of a student's undergraduate career.

When both student and tutor decide that it is time to bring formal closure to the student's "lower division" general education, they nominate a panel of three evaluators. Two of these must be faculty, and the third may be anyone appropriate to the student's education. The evaluators review the portfolio and then meet for approximately two hours with both the student and tutor. If the committee is satisfied that the student has met the standards imbedded in the University's general education requirements, the committee is empowered to waive the University requirements. The committee may also grant academic credit for demonstrated learning that took place outside of the classroom.

There is no typical C-E. They range from a rigorous formality through relaxed discussion to congratulatory anecdotes. There is a common structure, however. There is a formal presentation of the charge to the evaluators. The student makes a short presentation, and there is always extended discussion.

The effects and benefits are long lasting for all involved. Students say that the experience is equal to or often more important than graduation from the University. Evaluators invariably comment upon the privilege of being able to enter into their students' learning in a way

that is unique. Tutors and program faculty have an opportunity to see their best work critiqued by respected but honest colleagues.

There isn't an instrument available that is capable of either evaluating or describing the impact of the C-E. Everyone involved, student, evaluator, tutor, leaves with a sense of accomplishment, an idea of how to improve, and a renewed commitment to the academic enterprise.

II. The Program as Affective Learning Activity

If we hold a mirror up to this process, we can see two basic kinds of activity going on; one theoretical, the other operational. Our ideal is that there should be mutuality between the two so that each informs and influences the other. There is learning theory rooted in ideas about cognitive development and learning process. There is developmental theory rooted in notions of affective and moral growth. These are standard fare for educational researchers and practitioners. But we have sought to add to these theories, which are complicated enough in their own right, perspectives from interpretive anthropology which even further complicate our analysis and, in the first instance, appear to raise it to a more abstract level.

The processes of the Inquiry Program are in themselves rather straightforward. A relatively small group of first and second year undergraduates (one hundred more or less at any given time) are invited to become part of an ongoing community of learners and teachers who are dedicated to the proposition that a caring environment which provides each student with the opportunity to define, assess, and become intimately involved with his or her own learning aosl without fear of rejection or failure, offers the optimal context for a successful undergraduate career. Ten years of data, reflection, discussion and analysis, suggest that this proposition is valid. End of story -- and there is a sense in which little more needs to be said other than a more detailed description of the processes on the operational level. We have demonstrated that students can take responsibility for their own education in meaningful and productive

ways, that they do become involved in learning when they are given support, encouraged to risk success, and are validated for who they are and what they are willing to risk. In such an environment, given the "right" kinds of teachers and the "right" kinds of courses, they will not only learn how to learn, they will develop a repertoire of skills and methods that allows them to approach a wide variety of problems and kinds of knowledge with the confidence that they can do what is required with grace and style and understanding.

But all of this begs the question. It does not account for what is going on and it does not contribute much to our understanding of the fundamental ingredients that lead to "success." What we have tried to do in this paper is to give you our reading of the "text" that is the Inquiry Program and to offer some interpretations of the underlying structures and symbolic markers that we think lead to a more generative and complete understanding of what is going on here than could otherwise be achieved. As Clifford Geertz notes,

> The great virtue of the extension of the notion of text beyond things written on paper or carved into stone is that it trains attention on precisely this phenomenon: on how the inscription of action is brought about, what its vehicles are and how they work, and on what the fixation of meaning from the flow of events -- history from what happened, thought from thinking, culture from behavior -- implies for sociological interpretations. To see social institutions, social customs, social changes as in some sense "readable" is to alter our whole sense of what such interpretation is and shift it toward modes of thought rather more familiar to the translator, the exegete, or the iconographer than to the test giver, the factor analyst, or the pollster.
>
> (Geertz, 1983, p. 31)

At one level, the level Geertz calls "thin description" (Geertz, 1973), several notable things are going on.

We make the students feel important.

There is a modified Hawthorn effect here -- the students feel important because they know they are the object of particular kinds of attention and study. They have allowed themselves to be singled out, to be part of a "special" program that implies they are at least other than, if not superior to, their colleagues. The mere fact of choosing to join the program signals to the world that they have a self-image that sets them, in their own eyes at least, apart from the crowd, in spite of the fact that the "record" may not bear out that perception. Furthermore, we demonstrate an active caring for them -- for their personhood not just their intellect. Thus, their extracurricular concerns are as much a part of their contracts and self-evaluations as their courses and plans for formal study. We let them take the lead on this and are careful not to pry. There is a therapeutic model at work here.

We teach them how to read.

For the purposes of general education, the world is their text and the various ways of defining and understanding that world, that are practiced by academics, is the behavioral inscription which they are asked to learn to read both in terms of the forms and structures of the institution, and in terms of the content of courses and curricula. As they move from the general to the specific, into areas of specialization and majors, the text and the ways of reading become more detailed and more sophisticated. If we have done our job well, they will have little difficulty in making the transition to closer reading, and they will bring to that task a regard for subtlety and a capacity for hard work.

We challenge them as we nurture them.

In the modes courses and in the tutorial sessions we simultaneously work to reinforce what they have accomplished and encourage them not to rest on their laurels, but to find the questions embedded in their answers and move with them. Our classes are small and intense; we get to know one another in more than superficial ways. Out of this there develops a sense of trust, a willingness to expose one's ignorance and vulnerabilities without fear that they will be scoffed at or not taken seriously. The faculty model this behavior in order to help make the classroom a safe place. It eases their anxieties to know that we too, even we who are the knowers and guides, have doubts and uncertainties and areas of less than perfect knowledge or understanding. In exposing ourselves and in working to achieve ever more complete understanding, we seek to avoid condescension, oversimplification, and reductionist responses.

We encourage them to be critical.

"Question Authority" says the sign posted over the door. To unpack, to make systematic, comprehensive, and responsible that notion, is the prime burden of our pedagogy. We claim that learning how to argue about interpretation is the central objective of general education. We start with the proposition that in order to be a good interpreter one must learn to be a good questioner, must be able to recognize the differences between prejudice and discrimination, and be able to translate perceptions into articulated inquiry. Part of learning to read is learning to see subtle differences and their implications; part of learning to interpret is to learn how to cast aside preconceptions, to recognize the assumptions and the questions embedded in first-response questions and answers.

Finally, we are developmental.

Mustering knowledge, experience, and above all, patience, we constantly strive to begin (yet again) with them, where they are, as best we can understand that place. Our method is to keep them fresh and eager by not knocking them down with the right answer, but by practicing what we preach and finding the question embedded in the expression, regardless of the form it takes. Both facts and the fact of grades are less important, initially at least, than helping them to gain confidence in their own abilities. We are looking for long-term results, not immediate gratifications, and are consequently treading a thin line between rigor and nurture. We work with them to identify and define realistic and achievable goals that will lead to mutually agreed upon ends, all the while knowing full well that the ends are ever receding and, at best, will be experienced as respite, or turning points in understanding. Just as we teach them that learning how to listen is an essential component of learning how to learn, so we have taught ourselves how to listen for the embedded concern in their sayings and behaviors. We insist that they acquire the usual skills (writing, speaking, reasoning). Except for quantitative reasoning, they offer no resistance to this demand. Most often they know better than we do what is necessary; they just need help naming, recognizing and pursuing it.

III. Program as Ritual Drama

A second order of analysis takes us into a realm of interpretation and language that derives more from anthropological frameworks than from psychological frameworks or theories of learning, development, and measurement most commonly applied to educational situations.

Thus, of the many ways one can think about the impact of college on students, we have come to believe that for our purposes, at least, it is most helpful to construe the world of higher learning as a culture that is comprised of systems of beliefs about knowledge and attitudes toward work, authority, play and learning itself. Further, we have found it useful to think about this culture of learning and teaching as a kind of text that is to be read and interpreted much as one would read a novel or, perhaps more precisely, interpret a play in which one is simultaneously an actor and a witness to performances. This is improvisational theater -- there is a setting and there are certain donees (normative expectations) but there is no set script nor are the roles to be played defined except in the broadest and mostly two-dimensional terms. Each of the actors constructs the play as relationships develop. So, too, one's sense of one's role, although it has some commonalities with others and is rooted to preconceptions, is subject to constant interpretation and reinterpretation. Enter teacher (Professor?), intervene administrator (Chancellor, Dean, Financial Aid officer?), exit student (graduate, drop-out?). Assume nothing -- we do not know what is happening here until we stand back, look closely, and risk interpretation. Even then we may not "know" all that much but we will have

a reading (call it a yet to be disproved hypothesis, if you like) to which we have made a commitment and which we are willing to make public. On the principle that it is through argument about interpretation that we have the best chance of arriving at satisfactory (useful?) understandings, we invite readings that diverge from ours.

College, then, by this line of reasoning, is both more and less than the sum of its parts; there are collective understandings of what it is and what it does as well as individual experiences of the institution; the idea of the place and the process writ both small and large. If we consider all of the reasons a person might choose to attend a university, both recognized and unrecognized, realized and unrealized, those too become part of what college is for that person. Embedded in reasons for seeking an undergraduate degree are expectations, anticipations, fears and anxieties, that are brought to the enterprise where they are either reinforced or diminished or altered or eliminated, as the case may be. These expectations also are part of what college is. As the would-be student moves both physically and intellectually into closer proximity with the particular setting, personae, and activities that make up a specific institution of higher learning, he or she encounters external realities which interact (either negatively or positively) with internal sets of expectations. All things being equal, if the interactions are perceived as more positive than negative and if external (objective) realities do not thwart or reject the subjective experience of place and process, it is likely that the student will stay and graduate -- perhaps even succeed.

Clearly, the interaction between student and institution takes place on several levels simultaneously and continuously, both in the immediate concrete and in the temporary abstract. The saying (what happens) and the said (what is remembered of what happens) of the entire experience of the educational process need to be in some kind of synchronicity and need to conform to an acceptable version of external institutional realities in order for the student to feel as if he or she belongs there and, assuming that decisions to go or stay are at least partially rational, is reasonably justified in making the choice to remain. Sports and idiosyncracies aside, there are known and discernible patterns to the basic ingredients that go into such choices. When all is said and done, a student who is in some sense satisfied is more likely to remain in school than one who is not.

Our argument here is that an institution writ large, the University, for example, enacts an image of order -- of expectations and standards for behaviors and attitudes -- that in and of itself orders what it is permissible to accept and enact as knowledge or as learning. To the extent that a student's image of that order conforms with (or to) the institutional paradigm, as enacted by appropriate dramatis personae, the student is likely to find meaning in the interaction -- meaning that can and will persist beyond the initial interaction. But when the institution's model is too rigid, or the student's preconceptions are experienced as too divergent from the external reality, the possibilities for positive meaning rapidly evaporate, anomie and alienation set in, and the student departs.

There is a level at which mere manipulation of the institutional order -- more comfortable lounge furniture in the dorm, more access to pass/fail courses, a winning football team -- may superficially create a sense in the student that there is more conformity of expectations on both sides than would otherwise be the case, and the student persuades him or herself that the University is a good place to be. Unless there is a correlation between academic performance ("Real Learning") and the manipulation of the external environment, there is a lost opportunity for what we have come to call "deep affect," i.e., positive responses to fundamental concerns held by both the learner and the educator. What we are talking about here is fit of the kind that the most skilled and adept tailors can build into a garment so that its comfort and suitability increase through the years. There is both craft and art in creating such a fit -- it calls for both insight and adjustment, the application of perception in order to balance the cost benefits of ready-made with the greater likelihood of quality and durability found in bespoke. The kind of fit that a Maslow or a Parry or a Kohlberg would recognize as directly contributiong to growth and development.

One way of thinking about this kind of fit between what a student brings to a college or university and the programmatic, intellectual, and physical resources that institution offers the student, is in terms of "experience-near" and "experience-distant" concepts. An experience-near concept, according to Clifford Geertz, is one that someone --in our case a student -- might naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or she sees, thinks, feels, imagines, and so on, and which that student would

readily understand when applied by others. An experience distant concept is one that specialists of one sort or another (faculty, administrators, ed researchers) might employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims (Geertz, 1983, p. 57). In the case we are discussing here, the more overlap there is between the "nearness" of the language and concepts used by the student and by those whom she or he encounters as representative of the institution, the more comfort, the better fit, and the greater likelihood of reconciliation of differences between the student and the educational process. The objective here is not to reinforce prejudices on either side, but, rather, to discern and define common ground upon which to build. Theoretically, at least, the more mature and thus the more flexible and secure partner in this relationship is the institution or, more precisely, the representatives of the institution in the form of faculty who hope to ring specific changes in the attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviors of the apprentice who has approached their physical and intellectual turf with the idea of entering upon it and, even, of making of it his or her own.

If we resort to a case by case analysis of each entering student, and custom tailor a response to that person's needs and expectations, we can reasonably be confident of our chances for maximum success, however defined. Clearly large public universities have little hope of playing Rouseau to the Emile of the state's youth. But the argument of alternative programs is that there can be a rapprochement between the fiscal exigencies of public education and the private aspirations of large numbers of students, even to the point of touching them where they live, of

enlisting their complicity in the process of change that is education. Our basis for making this claim is perhaps too radical in its simpleness -- there needs to be a will to engage the student first on his or her terms, to pay attention to who they are and what they are about, to discern the connections between what the student is about and what the institution is about, to build upon these connections in such a way that there can be a transfer of power from the insider (faculty) to the outsider (student) so that the student can take over the process and continue it. (This comes perilously close to what used to be called "student-centered.") The will to do this comes not so much from the institution -- it is too abstract an entity even when construed as a collective will -- but from individual faculty acting in concert. It cannot be a completely individualized activity, nor should it be. Resources of money, time and energy are consumed too rapidly and too completely when they are applied too insistently to individual concerns. Rather, there needs to be an appropriate balance between the application of resources to the one and to the many; not an either/or, not to an average, but a selectively applied both-and, the one and the many. The trick is in the selection, in recognizing what it is about the one that applies with sufficiently equal force to the many so that both are not only accommodated but reached, enlisted, and engaged. It is the application that we call "useable attention" and it is the principles and process of selection that we think of in terms of interpreting the cultural play of which we are a part.

For those of us who work in the Inquiry Program the concept of "useable attention" is experience-near. It is part of our working

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vocabulary and its use signals the user as a member of an in-group for whom the term not only has meaning as a way of describing a complex set of behaviors but it also takes on another kind of meaning precisely because we are the ones who use it. So, also, the program employs a number of specialized terms that serve simultaneously to label the significant features of the programmatic process that set it apart from ordinary practice and to identify the user as a member of that special group. Our courses are "Modes," one does contracts and self-evaluations, meets with a tutor who meets with tutees, "portfolio" takes on a special meaning, especially in relation to the C-E and the declaration of intent, the exit interview and being "PD'd." This use of specialized vocabulary, much like the esoteric terms used by a microbiologist or a philosopher, helps to create a sense of community among those for whom that particular way of describing reality becomes ordinary language. Our esoteric language, again like the scientist or philosopher or literary critic, also implies a paradigm for learning in the sense that Thomas Kuhn uses the concept as a model for a way of thinking and behaving in the world: an ordering of reality that takes on more than ordinary meaning as one approaches it, uses its language and processes, and becomes a practicing member of that community of believers ([redacted] 1970).

This way of thinking about language as it connects to useable attention is relevant here because it is part of our interpretation of what it is we do for students that helps to insure a fit between them and us. Our basic objective is to bring a bunch of unknown high school students as close as we can to a developed and articulated sense of the values and

labors, ideals and practices, of becoming an educated person in the last quarter of the twentieth century. From their earliest formal contact with the Program, which is in the form of a letter that describes the program and invites them to consider joining it, we set a tone that is at once inviting, appealing to their personal sense of ambition (we characterize the program as particularly attractive to people who want to be wonderful), and demanding, because it involves small, intense classes, close contact with faculty, and different but more work than is ordinarily expected of UMass students. So begins the initial phase of useable attention. Athletic programs, fraternities, elite colleges for their "legacies," honors societies, all do a similar thing by singling out specific members of specific populations and making them feel wanted -- even needed. The difference is that we cast a wider net by inviting anyone whose self image allows her or him to identify with those who want to be wonderful regardless of prior performance -- we pay no attention to high school grades or rank in class or SAT scores.

Their decision to enter the program is reinforced and symbolically marked when we send them a selected reading list of books to read over the summer, books that will be discussed at orientation and during not only the first semester but throughout their time in the program. As you might guess, these are not ordinary texts nor are they best sellers, rather the books we select are chosen to further reinforce the sense that the student has elected to become a part of a group that takes learning seriously and which assumes that of course one would want to spend a part of the summer reading in preparation for the upcoming school year. We construe these

activities, the letter, the chance to talk with someone at the University who may be a kindred spirit, the personalized application to the program that asks them to talk about their dreams and ambitions for the future, the reading list and, finally, the special program orientation which consists of seminars and discussions of topical interest (sexism, racism, procrastination among the more than usually concerned, the philosophy and practices of what is now their program) -- all are part of a protracted rite of passage that in various ways marks a period of transition. We ask them to search their sense of who they are and to make some choices about what they want to leave behind and what they want to bring with them as they enter this new world. The metaphors of embarkation and journey (we frequently ask them to read Ursula LeGuin's The Dispossessed), and of a new day (with modulated overtones of rebirth), as well as of continuity and flow, are enacted in this ritual process by the language we use and by the behaviors we model. We ask them explicitly to take responsibility for their own education -- they are adults who have undertaken a particular kind of job of work (head work, for lack of a better term), their time is theirs to manage, their energies and passions are theirs to focus and apply. In order to make the metaphors tangible, to fix the ritual signals, we "ask" them to do a written self-assessment followed by a written contract which identifies their learning objectives (both formal and informal), the activities they will undertake to achieve these objectives, and the criteria they will use to evaluate their progress in achieving those objectives.

All of the students go through this process. Their days and their weeks are punctuated by meetings with their tutor, by discussions with their peers, and by classes in which the metaphors, the language, the behaviors, and the act of reflection about meaning and purpose are reiterated and reinforced.

By insisting upon these common behaviors we are deliberately signaling to the students that they are entering a new world, a world in which they are expected to assume a new identity, establish new relations with peers and with faculty, and take on responsibilities in relation to their work that are probably quite different from those they held in high school. In order to ease the separation anxieties that come with making such a transition, we offer them a community of fellow sufferers in whom they can see themselves reflected and, through the tutor relationship, someone to talk with about what they are going through and what it means to them. This relationship with a tutor, who acts as advisor, counsellor, and mentor, rolled into one, is key to establishing a trust in both the process and the probability that there will be a positive outcome for them if they stick with it. In terms of the ritual process they are going through, the tutor is their guide -- a kind of magic helper who is living proof that one can survive the trauma of separation and transition and come out the other side in good shape (cf. Victor Turner, The Ritual Process, Carlos Castenada, The Adventures of Don Juan).

Even though there are specific markers at the beginning of the process (the application, the interview, the contract) we contend that the process of transition lasts throughout their stay in the Program -- the

journey is a protracted one interrupted by vacations, semester breaks, the long summer after the first year, reentry the following fall, and on through the cycle of a second year to the culminating ritual of closure and transition into upper division work that comes with the Celebration-Evaluation.

There is an important sense in which the content of the contracts is less important than the fact of the contract. The same is true for the self-evaluations and the meetings with the tutor. There must be content and it must be approached rigorously and persistently, but in our approach to general education the specific details of the subject matter are less immediately relevant to the task of empowering students -- of helping them to develop skills of analysis, reasoning, articulation, and the self-confidence to apply these skills in any arena -- than is the process of getting them involved and caring about what they are doing. It is the caring that is central to the success of the enterprise. We care about each of them, about who they are and what they want to become, and through the activities described above we demonstrate that we are there for them, that we hold them to high standards of performance, and that we can and will provide them with the means of realizing their ambitions. We encourage them to risk success by risking failure, secure in the knowledge that we have a well established safety net, in the form of the program and its processes, that will prevent a disastrous fall should they seriously overreach their grasp. As their academic dean, the director of the program can reinstate those who misjudge their capacities by taking on more than they can handle. Similarly, because the program is empowered to offer credits for non-classroom activities, students can take either a lighter or heavier

course load than normal while earning credits for self-directed study or documented experiential learning.

Integral to this process of confidence-building and empowerment is the set of Modes of Inquiry seminars which embody the same principles of learning and teaching and caring that are manifest in other facets of the program. In these "modes" there is more emphasis on the acquisition of new knowledge and cognitive skills per se, but their primary objective is to provide students with a means of understanding how the world of the university (of formal learning) derives meaning from the ways it defines and pursues knowledge. In other words, we seek to demystify both the institution and the disciplines by identifying, naming and analyzing the conceptual frameworks in terms of which the practitioners of a discipline function. In this sense we are interdisciplinary in our definition of content and our approaches to understanding. Once the students understand the connections between assumptions and methods that typify the practice of professional knowledge builders, the better able they are to enter what is otherwise an alien world and be comfortable within it. The concepts of what world are more readily made "near" because the student has been allowed to get close to the idea and practice of the discipline rather than being held at a distance by the often inadvertent, but nonetheless real, protective postures of faculty who teach subjects rather than students.

A ritual process does not operate in a vacuum or even in terms of broad but discernible abstraction such as "an institution" or "the University." To be effective the enacted meaning which is the ritual must

resonate both in the consciousness of the player (individual student) and the collective sense of things which is the play (rules, written and unwritten, practices, and procedures of the program). This "play" is made manifest in the day to day activities of the program but it is given density and texture by the remembered and recounted individual and collective events in which the players participate -- the application, orientation, contracts, self-evaluations, tutorials, classes, portfolios, celebration-evaluations, graduations, shared readings, perceptions, discussions, conclusions, and so on. These distinguishable activities of the program provide the structure of the play but the remembered interactions provide the story (the "said" of the program in the sense we used the term earlier). Individual stories form episodes in the shared narrative of the multiple and various experiences of the program which, when taken together and subjected to the folk process of the tale-telling, becomes the Saga that perpetuates a belief that this program has been, is, and will continue to be different from all other educational processes in important ways (Clark, 1970).

It is the felt reality of this Saga, and the access to it provided by the experience of its rituals, that brings the experience of the entire enterprise "near" to the participants and marks them, both in terms of their own sense of themselves and in terms of the ways others see them, as legitimate members of a powerful community which is sanctioned by the authority of the institution and thus the world.

It is through participation in the Saga of the program, both as actor and as narrator, that the existential reality of the wholeness of

its discrete parts is made manifest. The individual student, as well as the individual faculty member, realizes a fit between their sense of who and what they are in the world and the story of the community of which they are a part that not only brings the entire process of their education near to who they are but also involves them tightly in values and behaviors for which they can and do take ownership.

As you can tell from the data described in the first part of this paper, not everyone experiences this resonance (fit) with the program, but most do. And for those who do there is a transcendence of the mundane encounters with the institution that renders moot questions of retention. Staying in school -- in their learning process -- is not an issue for them because the two have become one. Even for those who leave there is a real sense in which they stay. The memory lingers, the sense of self and action is perpetuated in their version of the Saga, and even though the denouement may take place on a different stage the story of the play is essentially the same as if they had remained.

In the sense that "Useable Attention" works as a metaphor that embodies a description of the still point in the turning world of our students' educational process, we offer it up as a means of thinking about what we do. Our hope is that others can approach the ways of being in the world that it implies and translate the beliefs, attitudes, rituals and activities into other localities, perhaps centered around different issues. We have concluded that if one can positively address underlying issues of growth, change and involvement, one can help students engage the world of their learning in ways that connect with the world of their being.

The more completely teachers can identify and work with the multiple realities of a student's experience, the greater the likelihood that this engagement will take place and, thus, the better the chances that he or she will achieve a "successful" undergraduate career.

Our argument is that the central ingredient in responsibly addressing the multiplicity of interactions that comprise the "whole" world of learning for the student, is an open, active, and continuous caring rooted in a self-knowing and similarly self-caring practitioner. In such a setting and with such actors theory merges with practice, ritual informs meaning, thought constitutes and complements behavior, values, skills, and understandings change in ways that are experienced as generative, and lasting learning takes place.

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